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ABSTRACT

This article details problems encountered in second language learning, with examples from Turkish and Japanese. It is pointed out that while pattern practice sounds good in theory, hours of pattern practice may result in learning a lot of vocabulary but few patterns. It is suggested that this is an inefficient way of learning vocabulary, and it is proposed that in learning a first language children learn first single word utterances, then two word utterances and so on until they can make extremely long sentences. It is also suggested that a new wave of teaching materials should be created working from this point of view to see how effective they might be. (Author/CLK)

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ON
METHODS OF TEACHING
FOREIGN LANGUAGES

BY

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ON METHODS OF TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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The past two or three decades have seen a major revolution in the methods employed in teaching foreign or second languages, especially English. There have been rumblings in the past few years, generally expressed in the form of papers read at meetings rather than publications, that these new methods are not working much better than the old ones. Perhaps the time has come to take a hard look at some of the things we have been doing, the results obtained and the assumptions behind these techniques. The purpose of such an investigation would not be to see if the new methods were better than the old, as this would be irrelevant, but to see if there is something wrong with the underlying pattern of teaching in the new methods.

One basic assumption of the "new" methods has been that the use of the oral-aural approach to language learning is superior to purely visual methods, i.e., reading-translation. The oral-aural approach has been successful in certain situations, but there is a second assumption underlying these new methods that I would like to question in this paper. If one examines any number of newly printed language texts, he will find that nearly all of them are set up to teach sentence patterns. Underlying this arrangement is the assumption that we learn best and most quickly by learning patterns. In fact, many linguists and language teachers say that learning "words" in isolation is a waste of time. Whether the linguist advising the author of a textbook is a structural linguist, a transformationalits or a traditional grammarian, all stress the use of pattern sentences as opposed to vocabulary acquisition.

What appears below is an exploration into my own attempts to learn Turkish and Japanese. This will show the reason for my doubts about most currently espoused approaches to second language learning. I have acquired some fluency in Turkish and some comprehension in Japanese, and while the experiences of

one individual cannot be definitive, they should be enlightening. This is introspective research, which has been taboo in scientific circles for decades, but I believe that a variety of such introspective reports from different scholar-learners could lead us to a much more fruitful approach to teaching second languages, as they supply a kind of information that is unavailable from any other source.

In 1955 I arrived in Ankara, Turkey. At the time I had heard exactly one word in Turkish, the word for *yes*, evet. Thus, I qualified as a complete beginner, and since I knew no language related to Turkish, it was necessary to begin from scratch. Immediately upon arrival I secured some Turkish language teaching materials from the American Embassy. Being a specialist in second language teaching methodology, I began to learn (or rather to attempt to learn) what are usually called the basic patterns of the grammatical structure as well as some useful sentences which are necessary for day to day existence in Turkey. My method was to sit with a native informant for an hour or two each day, have her say the sentences or phrases naturally and then repeat them several times as she corrected my pronunciation. In addition to this, I spent hours repeating utterances from a mimeographed list of sentences which the State Department used in teaching Turkish to employeees when they arrived in Turkey. This did not teach me Turkish at a very rapid rate, despite hours of drill on the so-called basic pattern sentences. It was three months before I could recognize anything other than a single word or sentence which I had memorized verbatim. Further, no one, in all that time, except in the classroom situation, ever spoke to me using one of the sentences that I had so diligently memorized.

How is the above-described situation possible? The sentences and vocabulary utilized by the State Department in creating their materials were very badly selected. This is also true of all similar texts that I have seen in the eighteen years during which I have been involved with teaching English as a second language. To show, by example, what is meant here, in the years 1958 through 1960 I conducted an extensive Turkish morpheme count, i.e., a 5% sample of just over 2,000,000 words of running text. The data included over 40,000 words of unelicited spoken Turkish, collected through hidden microphones, and over 90,000 words of elicited spoken Turkish, collected by asking Turks to tell stories, relate personal experiences and describe a typical day in their lives. In addition to the spoken materials, there were approximately 100,000 words of written Turkish selected from printed sources, such as newspapers, magazines,

textbooks, novels, etc. The results of this count showed most of the words used in the available teaching materials to be in no way representative of the most used (and by definition the most useful) Turkish words, e.g., *apteshane* is almost universally taught for toilet, yet this will draw a blank stare when said to almost any Turk. The only word I ever heard used in Turkey was *yüz numara* (the number 100) as the room numbered 100, 200, 300, etc., on any floor of any building is the toilet. Even more important, a very large percentage of the Turkish spoken by Turks did not follow the sentence patterns at all (transformational, structural or otherwise). These utterances would have to be called sentence fragments. I do not like this label, because these are perfectly legitimate utterance patterns in the language, and they do not fit the traditional grammatical patterns only because the traditional patterns reflect the method of grammatical analysis and not the reality of the language.

As examples of what I consider extremely bad selection, I shall take some patterns from the Army Language School's spoken Turkish texts. In lesson 1 there are a series of sentences: o kim, o Nancy, o ne, o sekreter, sen kimin, sen Nancy-sin, etc. I could continue indefinitely, but it would only lengthen the paper unnecessarily. The point is, of the patterns listed above, I have never, in sixteen years of speaking Turkish, heard a single Turk say a single sentence which represented one of those patterns. Further, I have never, as an American wishing to speak the language, had any use for any of the patterns. In all the written materials we studied in the word count, we never found a single one of those sentences or a sentence built on any of those patterns. They are grammatically correct, and they are understandable. However, they do not help you to understand a Turk, if when you ask a question, he answers with patterns different from those you have learned. This proves rather conclusively that the patterns, while teaching something about Turkish, are not teaching maximally useful vocabulary or sentences. For Turkish, the word count has been done, and good teaching materials could be prepared with the aid of the data provided, though to date they have not. The sentence patterns appear to rely heavily on what some American thought someone might want to say in Turkish. One major problem is the general assumption that everyone wants to say essentially the same things. One of the most significant problems in teaching a second language, particularly when it is non-Indo-European, is to teach the students the kinds of things the members of a different culture want to say, given a particular set of circumstances. One of

the typical examples of this problem, again taken from the Army Language School texts, but one which I have seen in every set of Turkish teaching materials that I have examined, is the sequence; speaker A, *Merhaba Bay*_____. Hello Mr._____. *Nasılsınız?* How are you? Speaker B; *Merhaba bay*_____. Hello Mr._____. *Iyiyim, tessekkür ederim.* I'm fine thanks. *Siz nasılsınız?* How are you? The latter two sentences are the important ones, because they are direct translations of what an American might want to say if he met someone on the street, i.e., how are you? and the response would be, I'm fine. How are you? The problem is that Turks never say this. They say the equivalent of, how are you? and the response is, thank you, and you? This is a simple example, and of course, if it were the only one, it would not matter, but this is in the first lesson in a conversation, and as the books generally progress, the sentence patterns get farther and farther from the things that Turks would actually say.

Where did these sentences come from? This is never spelled out in any of the literature, but I am sure that many of them come directly from the old *Structural Notes and Corpus* which was published by the American Council of Learned Societies in the early 1950's. They are, in effect, sentences which Americans might want to say with some frequency, but most of them are things that a Turk never wants to say, because they are not a part of his culture.

There is no point in beating a dead horse, so I will leave this and move on to Japanese. There is little to be gained by giving a long list of examples to show exactly the same thing for Japanese, though I could cite hundreds of sentences which I memorized in Japanese which have never been of any use to me whatsoever. The solution to this problem is very simple, however. All that needs to be done is to make some sort of count of the kinds of things that Japanese and Turks say to each other with a relatively high frequency. For example, none of the teaching materials that I used before going to Japan had the simple sentence, *errasshai*, nor the response, *tadaima*. There are hundreds of utterances such as these which would appear on a very slight count of syntactic structures for Japanese. These would be extremely valuable to the person wishing to learn Japanese. Yet no such syntactic counts of any consequence have been conducted on any language, including English. All languages need such counts before quality teaching materials can be prepared.

Now, to move on to a second, and perhaps much more important, assumption concerning second language learning, one often reads the statement in linguistic books that one should learn the grammar, not the vocabulary. From an introspective

point of view, the data concerning the way I learned Japanese and Turkish, does not indicate that this is a valid procedure, despite the fact that I have advocated it myself in earlier publications.

To review briefly my experience with Turkish, in the first few weeks in Turkey, I was able occasionally to understand something if it were said to me as a single word, or if it were a short pattern which I had learned as if it were a word. Beyond that, nothing. I would ask a simple question, which I had dutifully memorized, but the Turk did not respond with the simple answer given in the textbook, and I knew no more than I had before I asked the question. However, gradually I built up a vocabulary of lexical items or content words. After awhile, I could understand a number of utterances if they consisted of these single words, and after about three months I could occasionally hear and completely understand one of these words within a larger context, but only one word at a time, never a phrase, or even a two-word sequence, despite the fact that everything I had studied had been in the form of sentence patterns. I had exactly the same experience with Japanese. In both languages, as time went by, I found that I could shortly recognize two-word sentences, and at the same time I could understand such sequences within larger utterances, and in neither case was there any connection between these sequences and any of the "patterns" I had been learning. This leads me to question the validity of pattern practice. My students in both Turkey and Japan appeared to have the same problem. By the end of the first year of studying both Turkish and Japanese, I understood a large number of two-word sentences and sequences within larger utterances, as well as a few three-word phrases. As I learned more and more of the languages, I still could not utilize long complicated sentences. My learning was augmented, one word at a time, i.e., three-word phrases became four-word sequences or phrases, or in some cases four-word sentences or clauses, then five-word units, etc. I would like to reiterate that virtually none of this bore any relationship at all to any of the patterns that I had so diligently memorized and tried to practice on the local populations in both Japan and Turkey. The sentences learned were understood by the natives when I said them, but since the answers were incomprehensible to me, they served little purpose, other than to prove my own virtuosity in handling the language. My ability to use the language functionally increased as the vocabulary items which were commonly used became so firmly fixed in my mind that I did not have to stop and think about them when they were heard. As the vocabulary increased, I

found that occasionally I would hear two of these known words in sequence. It was this fact that made it possible for me to understand two-word sequences, not the fact of practicing patterns.

Let us look back historically at the inception of the use of pattern sentences in the teaching of foreign languages in order to understand how this practice has gained so much popularity. This procedure was at least partially derived from the fact that most first language texts many years ago were very effective when whole sentences were taught in the primary schools. However, the students in these classes had been exposed to their native languages for at least five years before coming to school. In addition to this, in the "good ole days" the traditional approach to grammar gave us a series of "patterns" which did not reflect English very well, but they were patterns (or if you prefer, grammatical rules) which told us how to construct grammatically correct sentences. In the early 1930's, when C.C. Fries was pioneering new methods of teaching English as a second language, he did almost all of his research on Spanish American students who had had six to eight years of English in the public schools of their home country before coming to the University of Michigan to learn by his "new" method. His method was extremely successful because of the latent English that his students had already learned, and the pattern sentence method is excellent for bringing out already learned vocabulary and teaching the student how to recombine these elements into meaningful, useful utterances. However, I contend at this point that it is almost useless to attempt to teach language skills to beginners in this fashion.

Many linguists state that students should learn language by the "natural" method, that is, the way children learn their first language. I have modified this in my earlier publications by stating that this is an uneconomical use of time, and that by approaching the language through pattern sentences we are saving time, because adult mental abilities are different from those of a child. It is now my contention that we are actually wasting time by attempting to teach language through a technique which does not work at all. What the student learns, despite the patterns presented, are lists of useful vocabulary, and the pattern practice actually impedes the learning process.

Returning to the statement that second languages should be learned in the same manner as first languages, it would be useful to know exactly how children learn first languages. Very little is known, at the present time, about this process. However,

there is absolutely no doubt that the first things children learn, in addition to the simple control of the sounds, are independent words. Between 1963 and 1969 I had the privilege of being affiliated with a research project at the University of Oregon Medical School, Portland, Oregon, on the development of language skills in normal children. We studied 800 children ranging in age from 3 months to 8 years from the Portland, Oregon area. The results of these studies have not as yet been published, but in these, as well as other descriptions of first language learning (cf. Ursula Bellugi and Roger Brown, The Acquisition of Language, an anthology, Mouton, 1964), early linguistic competence is described by the number of individual words that the child can handle. In our sample, for example, most eighteen month old children had a word approximating /zat/ which meant "what is that?" but it was a single word in use, intonation, etc. This should be a significant fact, since the child is exposed to the sound of English sentence patterns for 12 to 18 hours a day, depending on his age and the amount of sleep he gets. Why doesn't he learn full sentences from the beginning. Because it is impossible for a human being, with whatever natural equipment he has (deep structure?) to learn more than single vocabulary items or utterances which he can react to as if they were single words. At around 18 months, most children control some two-word sequences and appear to have a grammar all their own, according to some authorities. However, in our sample, none of the 18 month old children used anything other than single words, with one or two items such as /zat/ cited above. The onset of grammar is reported between 18 and 24 months generally, but this grammar does not appear to agree with adult grammar. As children develop, I see in their acquisition of language exactly the same processes that I described earlier for my own learning of Turkish and Japanese. The point is that for a time a child can handle *only* single words, then *only* one and two word sequences, then *only* one, two and three word utterances, etc. This is probably a mathematical function of the structure of the human brain, in some as yet unknown way.

In Turkey in 1955 I was interested in the often quoted statement about language acquisition that learning simple vocabulary was not particularly useful. In order to test this as an hypothesis, I took a beginning class of adult Turks and fed them 700 English words during the first week of study. By the end of the second week these students knew these words cold. I could

hardly ever trip any of them up on the meaning of a single one of these vocabulary items. You may respond with the statement that they could not understand very much English either, with only that many words, and this is to some extent true. If you utilize the method of teaching them only whole sentences, and the students learn only thirty or forty words (and do not learn the sentences you have been drilling them on, which is my experience if they haven't already had years of English behind them), I would contend that the students have learned over ten times as much English studying only vocabulary at the end of the same period of time. One can always assume that the introduction of patterns, of whatever variety, builds a foundation for more rapid learning later on, but what I am saying here is that all of the evidence that I have been able to examine in eighteen years of teaching English as a second language indicates to me that this is a false premise.

The rationale behind teaching structure, that is, grammar, as opposed to vocabulary, comes to some extent from confusion by linguists between language analysis and language learning. If we take a look at the structure of any language, we find that in a given utterance over half of the morphemes of any given page of printed text or in any utterance of the spoken dialects are grammatical. Further, all languages examined statistically appear to have less than 300 such grammatical morphemes. This handful of structural units have frequencies of occurrance in normal usage which far exceed those of the lexical morphemes (cf. Joe E. Pierce, A Statistical Study of Grammar and Lexicon in Turkish and Sahaptin, Klikitat, IJAL:29:96-106, 1963). However, neither the child nor the adult learner learns the grammatical forms (such as in, at, from, -ing, -s, etc.) with the facility with which they learn lexical items (such as door, stove, paper, etc.). This is true because the lexical items mean the things that the speakers want to talk about, and the grammatical markers do not. If I know the words for a large number of commonly desired items, I can make a great deal of my wants known in any foreign language with no grammar at all, but on the other hand, if I know the grammar perfectly and do not know the lexical items, I can make none of my wants known, though I can imitate the jabber-wocky, i.e., the toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe while the momraths outgrabe. Further, the grammatical forms occur in normal conversation with such extremely high frequency that they will be learned much more rapidly than any given lexical item, once the student is able to recognize instantly the meaning of the "content" words in an utterance.

Now, let us look briefly at what we have said and see if there are not some implications in it for the preparation of language teaching materials. The evidence presented above shows that small children, school age (in Turkey and Japan where I taught for several years) as well as adults, appear to learn to use and recognize single words alone before they begin to learn to use two-word sequences. In the early stages the students are learning some vocabulary and something about the sounds of the language, often despite the teacher and the materials, not because of them. Incidentally, in all of the languages for which I have seen statistical information, there is a list of less than 1.000 morphemes which accounts for well over 95% of the words in any given conversation or on any page of printed material. If these thousand words could be taught so completely that the student could recognize them instantly (with no thought at all) during the first few weeks of study, I believe that his subsequent learning would proceed much more rapidly than using currently popular method, because he would already know almost all of the substantive vocabulary that he really needs, except for special occasions. The odd word that he did not know here and there would not throw him off stride and make him give up, as much currently utilized teaching materials do. When the student was then ready for two-word sequences, he would already know nearly all of the words he needed to form this kind of utterance, and he would pass quickly over the stage and on to the three, four and five word sequences. Patterns would then be meaningful because the student would have to concern himself only with the pattern as he would already know the vocabulary. I have had many students who stated flatly that they could not learn, remember or use a pattern, if they did not understand all of the pieces included in the utterance. This is my personal experience exactly. This implies that no matter how much time is spent on patterns, the students will not learn them until after they have mastered the vocabulary which makes up the patterns. This reiterates the importance in language classes of learning vocabulary first.

As I see language classes being taught, the students are learning nothing but vocabulary in any event, and this is being taught presently in the most inefficient way possible. This is true because, despite all the pattern practice in the world, all the students are capable of learning at first are vocabulary items. Teaching patterns actually retards the learning process markedly. The class to which I taught the 700 words in the first two weeks of an intensive program in Ankara, Turkey went on to do

an unbelievable job when they came to the United States at a somewhat later date. No other group in all the time I was in Turkey did anything like as well, but that is the only group I ever had the opportunity to teach from the very beginning in the way I felt to be most fruitful. Later, I was forced to follow a system which was approved by all of the staff, and this did not include an emphasis on vocabulary acquisition. In fact, the approved plan limited vocabulary taught to less than 700 total words in a 13 week intensive course, and many of these were very bad choices in terms of their utility, e.g. "glad to have you aboard," for "come in."

It seems to me that all the evidence indicates that language classes should begin with a heavy emphasis on vocabulary learning, for perhaps the first 60 hours of instruction or so. These should be words from the 700-1,000 most frequently used vocabulary items in the language being taught. This is also the very best time to teach the phonology by the simple device of demanding near perfect pronunciation of each of the 1,000 words being taught along with a few specific phonological drills. Then two-word sequences or patterns could be introduced, utilizing the same words until two-word sequences appear to be mastered. Then for the rest of the next hundred or so hours, new words and new two-word grammatical patterns could be introduced. After that three-word utterances could be introduced. I use the word *utterance* rather than sentence because many of the most useful expressions would not be sentences. I do not know exactly how much time should be spent on any particular phase of such a course as no experimentation has been conducted on this. However, I feel very strongly that only through this procedure will we be able to take full advantage of the way people "normally" acquire language skills and make significant improvements on what we are doing presently.

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